MENISCUS

Ryan Cornelius, BA

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2007

APPROVED:

Corey Marks, Major Professor
Bruce Bond, Committee Member
John Robert Ross, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Cornelius, Ryan, Meniscus. Master of Arts (English – Creative Writing), May 2007, 47 pp., references, 6 titles.

Meniscus is a collection of poems with a critical preface that examines the nature of “silence” and oblique language.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

PART I

PREFACE

In her essay “Disruption, Hesitation, and Silence,” Louise Glück says, “I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence” (Glück), and I feel a similar attraction. The impact of a poem can be heightened by the mystery in what is left unsaid, and as the active reader studies the poem to resolve these mysteries, the reader uncovers another piece of him- or herself. As Shelley says, “It [poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (56). The best poems will perpetually bid the reader to return to them again and again, and with each recurring visit the reader peels back another layer of the onion.

I am reminded that, in the unearthing of Pompeii, archaeologists found entire meals sitting on breakfast tables: Dates, eggs, bread, and olives lying buried, untouched and uneaten, for sixteen hundred years. Until that moment of unearthing in 1748, the fledgling archaeological community was uncertain about Roman diet and daily life. With the excavation, those questions could be answered. But what made them dig in the first place? People were not unconsciously ignorant of Pompeii. It existed in literature surviving from the Roman Empire. Those scholars were ignorant of its location, and that prevented them from unearthing it. Histories provided the antipasti, so to speak, and all that was lacking was a place to dine. When Herculaneum was discovered, a city reported to be near Pompeii, archaeologists knew at that point they were on to something. From Herculaneum, they were able to redefine their search. If humans had no innate desire to solve the mystery, Pompeii would still lie buried, and because scientists were eager to return to Pompeii over the years, the mystery continued to bear fruit in the way of surprise and discovery.

The mystery of what is left unsaid in a poem can lead to resonating, passionate surprise because the enjoyment from revelation stimulates the imagination of the reader. I believe a poet can achieve this surprise through allusion and suggestion and can capitalize on the surprise it generates. If the poet can match metaphor with silence suggestively, to make the reader say, “What is said is not as interesting as what is not said,” then the poet can increase the impact of the poem commensurate to the magnitude of surprise that is achieved. Linda Gregerson says in an interview of her concept she calls “cognitive syncopation:”

> Anything too proximate can be problematic…Whatever poetry is, however one constitutes form, it depends upon the tension between an arbitrary coercive contract on the one hand and open-ended discovery and risk-taking on the other. (Marshall and Meyer 46)

This explanation is closest to my meaning of how silence operates throughout a poem. When readers are faced with a poem that is complex and mysterious, one that is elusive or silent, they take an active role to solve the mystery. They work to sort things out, to make sense of something elusive. When they palate a poem that is straightforward, or overt, they may find the language flat and boring. In fact, they may even refer to it as prose. What is it in the nature of verse that is so facilitated by this oblique language?

It should be obvious to any writer of poetry that what defines it is its purchase in metaphor, its existence in allusion. By the term “oblique language,” I mean language that does not necessarily deny the reader a literal reading, but rather motivates the reader away from such an interpretation, and this motivation can be achieved most readily in poems that possess this silence. Glück claims of Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of

Apollo" that the incomplete statue allows for possibility in the silence of its missing parts, where an intact statue refuses this possibility:

"We cannot know," Rilke says, of the torso of Apollo. The unknowable is the poem's first referent, the context. And it is interesting to try to imagine the poem's arising out of another, a whole, statue. Something is lost; the poem turns a little corny, a little trite. For something whole, the act of giving directions is simple bossiness, nor is any virtuosity involved in the act of hearing such directions. What wholeness gives up is the dynamic: the mind need not rush in to fill a void. (Glück)

What Glück says of the wholeness surrendering the dynamic is true only to a certain point. The statue is supposed to be headless, yet its subject is known as Apollo. That's a paradox. Rilke says we cannot know, and yet we do. We must assume then that since it is only headless, as opposed to being more completely destroyed, it is still recognizable. There must be enough information remaining to recognize the statue as that of Apollo, yet it must also retain enough of a mystery as to become dynamic by its incompleteness. However, if the reader is left so completely unaware by a writer's attempt at silence or "oblique language," and there is not enough for the reader to make a successful leap in understanding, then the poem may well fail.

When we read poems that make good use of silence, we must read with heightened senses like moving through a dark room with a flashlight. The mystery created by the silence twists the familiar into the unfamiliar the way in which the flashlight turns the familiar furniture of a dark room into unfamiliar shadows. To use Shelley's words again, "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents"

(56). When we encounter these transformations in poetry, they remind us just how little we know about the world. They return us to the magic of mythology and childhood.

In poetry it is paramount that the images be accessible to the reader and must also have the emotional reservoirs that allow for inexhaustible meditation and thought. While beautiful images may be pleasing to the reader, without associated meaning, they are fleeting. A poem about an ordinary easy chair is only interesting to the person who wants to sit in it or buy it, but if a poem were to transform that chair into something new each and every time the poem is read, that would be most desirable to me.

In the poem “Everyone Was in Love,” Kinnell transforms the scene of two naked children who have draped themselves in snakes—which would be horrifying to most any parent—into a scene of miraculous insight and discovery. While the language of the poem is crystal clear, the poem refuses to address the obvious danger; instead it presents the scene as a mirthful occasion that reminds the speaker of the love shared between all.

As snake imagery makes an appearance on almost every line of the poem, we must assume it plays an important role. Snakes can be attributed to sin, healing, wisdom, “otherness,” venom, metamorphosis, eternity, or rebirth. Any one of these associations, or perhaps all of them, takes shape in the reader’s mind because Kinnell does not focus on any specific one until the final lines of the poem; therefore, we must allow that our interpretations include all conceivable meanings.

The final line is a gripping one that announces some of the characteristics of the silent language mentioned earlier. The frog is elsewhere, yet the poet makes no mention of the words “heaven,” “afterlife,” “hell,” or “death.” Again, the reader must

make an assumption on his or her own. The warning the little girl gives to the speaker that the frog has gone “elsewhere” transforms our own interpretations of what has happened. We begin to see death through the eyes of a child again and slough off the adult eyes with which we view it.

Every line maintains the energy of the preceding line and moves the reader to further contemplation. The reader is presented with an estranged scene, one of naked children covered in snakes, yet it is a scene where we as readers have access to all the images: snakes, children, spring, frog, and youth. In the immediate strangeness we do not feel distant from the poem; rather, we feel drawn to its originality and magic. In her essay, “Moving Means, Meaning Moves,” Heather McHugh addresses this idea of estrangement of language:

> A poet is materially engaged in estranging language, all the time—her own language must become strange to her. The motion of a poem is, in some essential way, an estranging motion. A poem means to move you, but in unexpected directions. (208)

This concept mirrors perfectly what Shelley claims in “A Defense of Poetry,” in which poetry springs from the “nature itself of language” and is “susceptible to various and delicate combinations” (56).

While some people enjoy routine, more sophisticated readers do not have much respect for the expected: in fact, readers who become complacent in a poem breeze through it faster and faster, skipping over words they anticipate. And yet, far too often, especially now in contemporary American poetry, catchphrases and freeze-dried images fuel repetitive lyrics. One poem begins to look like the next in our supermarket

of language. Weak poetry becomes dependent on well-used metaphors and clichés. The words become disassociated from the images they represent, and poems become more esoteric and less visceral.

I believe that poetry must make a person feel more than know; a poem must drive a reader's instincts. As a poet, I want stimulate desire for beauty and discovery in the reader, and I want to accomplish this through suggestion and silence. I work to build a poem with cyclical structural elements, like recursion and enjambment, because I believe these elements work best with silence to create surprise. The surprise that comes through silence, as I understand it, works as the slap or kiss during the act of homage—a "metaphorical punch in the gut"—that serves to stick the associated image in the mind of the reader.

At this point, I would like to draw a distinction in my usage of both words: "repetition" and "recursion." By repetition, I mean the continued use of a word throughout a line or stanza or entirety of a poem. The word may appear many times, and is static in each occurrence. This form of repetition is in one direction, the way in which a steam hammer pounds on a conveyor belt, or the way a cog returns to the same divot again and again. I work to avoid the simple repetition of words because it alone is not enough to make a line worthy of significance, nor is recursion.

By recursion, I mean the reoccurring of associated meanings and tropes. Words may or may not be repeated, but the resident ideas must be—and it is this that is most important—the tropes must return onto themselves. It is this I endeavor to utilize through the recursion of words and tropes at intervals that provides the reader an assured, strong feeling when reading the poem and yet fluctuates like waves through

the readers' minds. Over the course of the poem, these familiar things change as language is in a constant state of flux, and the readers must change with them.

As recursion is so prevalent in the nature of language, and language is so essential to the nature of poetry, it would be a waste to not employ recursion at appropriate opportunities in poems. In fact, I believe all poems to be recursive in nature. As readers, we reach the end of the line, and the poem dies a little at the right margin, and then is born again at the left. In this regard it will always be cyclical, and it engenders the poem to eternal fragmentation. McHugh states this brilliantly in her essay:

> Line breaks willfully remind us of the wordlessness that surrounds and shapes the verbal passage; one could even say (if one wished to sabotage a fashionable critical locution) that in poetry the margin isn't marginalized. Indeed, the margin's of the essence—it's an absence that makes its presence felt at every turn. As every student knows, the root of the word verse lies in the Latin for "turning." As every student also knows, the Greek root of poetry (poesis) means "making"; but a lineated poem is a making full of breakings. A poem is, in other words, not only in words: it is a structure of internal resistances, and it's no accident that paradoxes arise at the very premises of its act. (208)

A poem is fragmented because of line breaks, which provide an opportunity to create recursion. Because of the idiosyncratic manner in which we read, from left margin to right margin, our eyes scan the page and the words blend fluidly along the line until they reach the white space of the margin. Then they must trail back across the page and pick

up on the next line. This hitch in between right and left margins provides an opportunity to add silence to the poem through enjambment. Louise Glück does so in the poem "The Red Poppy" from The Wild Iris in which she masters this idea of recursion and silence between lines. The poem ends on the enjambments:

> I am speaking now
> the way you do, I speak
> because I am shattered. (5)

The image of "being shattered" that Glück ends with resonates with the idea from McHugh's essay on the fragmentation of a poem. In the same way, language itself is shattered as a whole because we speak it in broken phrases, yet each is a part of the whole—each adds more to the overall meaning. And because language is shattered in this way, there is potential to elude directness and create mystery.

I'd like to delve further into this idea of language surrounding this image of "being shattered," in particular because it lends itself to the other religious connotations in the poem. The myth of the Tower of Babel claims that as humankind moved further away from the one god, and therefore further away from union, we became increasingly insular and withdrawn, and so the "one" language was shattered into many. I bring this up to illustrate the times when people, especially those feeling alone and isolated, use language in invoking prayer. And in this isolation we experience because of the proliferation of language, we find further similarities between ourselves because of our binding mortality.

The poem takes on the shape of a prayer. It becomes both hypnotic and consoling. This can be seen in the lines:

I have

A lord in heaven

called the sun, and open

for him, showing him

the fire of my own heart, fire

like his presence.

What could such glory be

if not heart? (Gluck 29)

Obviously, we cannot miss the line “a lord in heaven,” as a solid identifier of prayer imagery because of its closeness to the Lord’s Prayer. The poem even puns on the next line, renaming this lord as the sun. The multiple silences in this image allow the reader to interpret the lord in heaven as Mithras, Jesus, Apollo, or even Helios or Ra. By refusing to capitalize the word “lord,” and producing this mystery, Glück allows us these varied interpretations within the poem.

But the poem resembles prayer most in its rhythm and music, almost like that of an incantation—many of Glück’s poems do so. We can see the recursion of “him”—“open / for him,” with the enjambment adding a little silence to the line, “showing him.” The line starts and ends with a pronoun representing a deity, as would a supplication. The recursion of “him” also lends itself when we recognize the nod towards the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And yet again, at the end of the line, following the second “him,” another enjambment, adding more silence that magnifies the leap the reader takes from god to “fire” which begins the next line. Silence and recursion, together, empower the mystery of the poem.

On the following line, Glück gives the reader more recursion, opening with “fire” and ending with “fire,” furthering the image of infinity, and yet the two phrases modifying each individual use of “fire” are different: “fire of my heart” and “fire like his presence.” This recursion demonstrated the similarly suggested by the two “fires” and strengthens the repetition, making it integral to the overall understanding of the poem. The movement ends on the rhetorical question, “What could such glory be/ if not heart?” The enjambed line coming between “be” and “if,” as if to suggest a question to the existence of the holy and continue to suggest that one’s heart is the only divine essence—equal to that of holy fire.

The image of heart is also meaningful when applied to the recursion: the heart being the most repetitious muscle of the body. This image of the heart fuels the idea that if something is repeated, then it begins to mimic the natural rhythms of the body, and if something can imitate those natural rhythms, then it can take life in itself. It becomes both hypnotic and consoling. If pushed to its furthest extremes, it becomes almost erotic and mesmerizing.

The energy brought about by the reader searching for understanding in the poem and the speaker’s history drives forward so that the poem doesn’t stagnate in the description of the flower’s lord in heaven or the color of the fire. The poem picks up even more energy in the comparison between the poppy and the sun as both being on fire. By its end, the poem begins to profess its true nature when Glück begins to lay on the meaning. The reader is engrossed and eager for the next and next line.

In principle, using recursion in a poem is the same basic idea as writing a poem in verse yet more organic. It’s not as strict as metered rhythm or a traditional form.

Meter provides repetition in the way of voice stress and the reader begins to anticipate the rhythm and is enticed to follow as the poem meets the anticipated rhythm. In this same vein, the poet repeats images, words, and phrases—and of course stresses—to establish, and exploit, a rhythm. In the poem, Glück repeats words to provide a structure, for example, building on the above quote, “him-him,” “fire-fire,” “heart-heart,” and so forth. Each repetition strengthens the poem, adding form, and we are allowed a slightly different meaning from each appearance.

Also, I think it must be addressed that the authority of Glück’s speaker adds to the silence of the poem. The speaker speaks to the reader as if the reader were a confidant and privy to the innermost desires and feelings. This is demonstrated by the frankness of the address and clarity of language. In this confidence, the way one would speak to a trusted friend, the speaker assumes we know the back story—so why discuss it? However the truth is we don’t know the speaker well at all, and we want to discuss it yet can’t, and so we are left to ourselves to decrypt the back story.

In “Waterborne,” Linda Gregerson makes good use of silence to create the ambiguity that she addresses in the earlier quote. Gregerson uses a very novel form that seems to take on a laconic feel after the first movement. The words move in a zigzag, reminiscent of a stream descending from a larger body of water and seem to fit perfectly in this chosen form. The words run down the page, and the pace and melody are calm and relaxed. This relaxed tone also gives the speaker an authority of familiarity, as in Glück’s poem. The speaker tells her story to the reader as if the two are old friends gossiping over a cup of coffee. This sense of familiarity ingratiates the speaker to the reader, and yet asks the reader to supply information that is not included

in the narrative. Furthermore, Gregerson fluctuates between vague images and specific images. In one line, the speaker refers to Steve, a specific person whom we don't know, and on another line, she refers to "my neighbor," another person we don't know. Yet Steve is a specific person and Gregerson implies through this candidness that we should know him, while with her use of "my neighbor" she implies we are not expected to know the neighbor.

To elaborate on this point further, in the first section, she names a specific, and places the specific in an ambiguous surrounding:

> The river is largely implicit here, but part
> of what
> becomes it runs from east to west beside
> our acre of buckthorn and elm, (26)

By placing the definite concrete noun "river" inside the indefinite scene described plainly as "here," we ground ourselves in the concrete rather than the abstract. However, as the specific image unfolds into the larger unspecific scene, and we read further into the poem, the specific becomes more mysterious by way of the context. The river in this first line is "implicit." We are unaware of exactly what it may be implying, and though it is said to be implicit, we still want to see a river in our minds because that is the concrete word on the page. Is the river implicit by itself, or does it collude with something else?

Then as we read even further, we realize the concrete noun we see on the page is not included in the image we see in our minds. What Gregerson really expects us to see in our minds is only a part of the river. The river that is not in the scene implies the stream which is. With these lines Gregerson creates silence by allowing an absent

entity to imply a present entity, and surprises the reader with a grammatical bait-and-switch. She then cements this chiasmic turn by bringing light to the abstract “here” when she describes it as an acre of buckthorn and elm. So we are left with the one abstract “river” because it is absent from the scene, but which began the poem as a concrete “river” because it was the only concrete noun we had to go with.

And still in the implied stream, we are not yet cognizant of what she intends: is it a metaphorical stream, or a literal one? There is an allusion implicit here. The reader is almost expected to know. And Gregerson continues in the next lines with more of the same silence she creates by “crossing” specifics with non-specifics:

> (And part
> of that, which rather weighs on Steven’s mind,
> appears to have found its way to the basement. Water
> will outwit
> a wall.) (26)

It is incredibly satisfying at this point to see that the fluid rhythm of words down the page reverses itself on this line—almost as if the words themselves have struck a wall and puddle up in their passage around the obstruction. With the first images in the poem of an implied stream serving us a mental reversal, Gregerson now gives us a visual reversal here as her words mimic the motion of a stream towards the sea, and yet as our eyes scan the page they almost resist the backwards motion. It is almost as if this line moves against the current of the poem.

This image is implicit and literal—creating more mystery for the reader to uncover. But out of this reversal, the reader encounters another specific: “Steven’s

mind." We do not know who Steven is, or what his mind might be capable of (more silence), yet this "part" of the river weighs heavily on it (another specific). We do not even know why Steven is important. We only have the authority of the speaker to demonstrate for the reader that we should know Steven. If that is not enough for us to take notice of his name and assign him worth, we have the appearance that the speaker values Steven, and on the speaker's authority, we as readers should also value Steven, despite that we yet know nothing of him other than a name.

This ambiguity allows us to expand our minds and imagine a Steven we want to imagine. We create a simulacrum in his place—our Steven is not the real Steven because simulacra are always imperfect copies of the original. We cannot know (as Rilke says) if the real Steven even exists at all. This issue brings us back to the example of Pompeii. What is it about Steven and his mind that makes us want to know more? Why do we seek to uncover this? We cannot stand this utter silence. It is impressive and satisfying—and yet we desire to end it. This mystery actively engages to ask questions. We are no longer content to receive information but seek to root it out. Our minds immediately begin to enact a history and a life for Steven. Where we are lacking in factual evidence, we create myth and conjecture. As a result, we come away with a richer, more fulfilling experience.

Gregerson continues in this fashion of blending specific images with vagaries, continuing to be elusive while dropping concrete breadcrumbs along our path, so that we must follow if we are to find our way out of the forest. In the following lines, "This bridge/ lacks every/ grace but one, and that a sort of throwback," Gregerson dispenses more indefinite imagery—what exactly is every grace but one, and what is the one? Yet

we know of the “one” a very specific quality—that it is a throwback. We must read further to discover that this one graced in that even the engineers have been forced by water to alter their plans. This image ends the first section of the poem as Gregerson cements her assertions that water, in its patient pace, will not be denied its course—an allusion to inevitability. And what is it that we are to assume is inevitable? Why has Gregerson chosen water as the vehicle for this message?

The reader is pondering these quandaries, when, beginning the second section, Gregerson attacks with gusto. The first sentence is a humdinger of an indirect statement. “Apart from all the difference in the world, that is,” defies our attempts to establish any one meaning to the sentence. It is again a fluid combination of both specific and non-specific language. We see again, a repetition of the word “part” in “apart.” “From all” is a generalized notion, but “the difference” is singular and specific. We must ask ourselves just what is “the difference?”

It refers back to the previous section that says it is heartening that one river makes a difference. The meaning is layered, however, and as it points backwards, it continues to move forward, adding further energy to the poem. Then the final assertion in the inverted syntax, “that is,” allows us to read the line as separate from the previous sentence that water exists as both a part and a whole, both separate and included in all things. More of this echo imagery is evident in the lines:

> My neighbor’s favorite spot for bass is just
> below the sign that makes his fishing
> rod illegal,
> you might almost say the sign is half

the point" which makes us think "What is the other half? (26)

A beautiful movement that allows a reader to come to the conclusion that the other half is that the affirmative and negative exist in close proximity. The sign declares his actions illegal, and the other half is him fishing just below the sign—just as the sky is an exact opposite of solid water and yet exists as its other half. Through her use of "silence," because she has not said one way or the other, Gregerson allows the reader to move from this revelation to the supposition that, in human relationships (for example, the ones peppered throughout the poem), persons are also "half the point" from one another.

The obstinate will of the fisherman is an image we can attribute to the image of the water and the river. No matter how one may attempt to control water, it always will eventually escape its container. As a liquid, water takes the shape of that which holds it, and yet it overflows, breaks free, cracks, and runs wild. As a force of nature, water has a mind of its own, just like human beings. These ideas are implied by the poem, not explained literally. I'd like to think this is why Gregerson chose water as a vehicle, but since she's silent on the issue, I can only assume so.

To conclude, I'd like to continue with this image of water. Think of the reader's mind as a calm lake, and the image a stone, and the poet the one who casts the stone into the lake. The image creates a splash and sends out ripples in all directions from the point of impact. That image goes through the reader's mind and the reader starts looking for associated ideas, other images, past experiences, anything that has similarity to the cast stone. The ripples travel outward, yet also travel back towards the point of impact so that there is resonance long after the stone has sunk to the bottom.

The true poet examines just how to cast that stone into the pond. He or she can just walk up and drop it straight into the shallow water by the beach, but that's not very interesting because the water is not deep; in doing so there is only one splash and ensuing events transpire until the once broken surface returns to relative calm. Or the poet can take a smooth, polished stone and cast it side-arm across the surface of the water. With this oblique throw, the nature of the water itself pushes the stone along its surface so that it skips and makes many different splashes, each sending ripples outward. Some crash against each other and cause even bigger waves to form. If the stone is smooth enough, or if the poet's arm is strong enough, the stone might skip cleanly across the lake and lie there, on the other shore, for someone else to return it.

Works Cited

Glück, Louise. *The Wild Iris*. New York: Ecco Press, 1992.

Glück, Louise. "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence." *The American Poetry Review*. September 1, 1993. Rpt. in HighBeam Research, retrieved February 26, 2007, from http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-14375024.html

Gregerson, Linda. *Waterborne*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.

Kinnell, Galway. *Strong Is Your Hold*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.

Marshall, Christine and Nadine Meyer. "A Conversation with Linda Gregerson." *Center: A Journal of the Literary Arts*. Vol. 4 (2005): 44-54.

McHugh, Heather. "Moving Means, Meaning Moves: Notes on Lyric Destination." *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World* (1999): 207-220.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Defense of Poetry." *Toward the Open Field*. Edited by Melissa Kwasny. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004. 48-76.

PART II

POEMS

Commute

Sure, it was a crossroads,
a kind of convergence
between his way and mine,

when in second gear, coasting
through his turn, his eyes
through the open window paused

with me in view, maybe an afterthought,
no lines or gray hair years ago,
when before glasses and beards

we were both chasing sports, opening girls,
both so unsure which underwear made a man,
when life was humiliation and lunchrooms,

after school specials before the fall
of communism and jazz, and I saw it
on his face, that he almost remembered

Saturday mornings, this one in particular,
in that drainage culvert, so mutual
to our youths, the warm swarms

of black tadpoles, like purple hulled peas
in the palm of his hand, ichors pouring
through the cleavage of his fingers.

I had wanted to tell him they had all
ruptured, like salmon roe or tumors,
and that little look was enough

to see my life in his, to know not all
of us have made it this far between drugs
and encephalitis,

and when he rotated his head in tandem
with mine, almost recognizing himself
in the glass before disappearing

into my blind spot,
eclipsed by a horse's ass
in a red rusted trailer.

America before Lunch

Half the class wears paper
hats to make pilgrims.
The others paint their cheeks
in tempera
and it cracks from smiles.
I must admit my father is not dead
and my happiness continues
to remind me all sand
is stone in the beginning.
You see in my world
there is no burden,
only recess and second period reading.
Here I've taped two candies to a turkey
that mimics the loops of my fingers,
my palm, and I must confess
it looks like yours. Over here I've parked
the Mayflower, and here I've built
the mountains up to be something they are not,
and here orange trees over potato plants,
and here the rows of pineapples,
and peppermints at Christmas,
here it is
the giving season after all,
and here swamp land, and here no man's land,
here the Black Hills bleeding gold,
and here I bury fish inside corn roots,
and here tan hides of deer and bear,
and here there is a cave into the hollows
that howls when the wind finds it open,
here the prairie burns because the bison
do not eat the grass, and here chickens peck
into dirt, their little beaks fingers poking
down below the surface the grubs
that will grow into something not
quite like a brown-winged moth.
Here in summer, I shoot fireworks
overhead. Watch them break
apart in silence
and rain down, candies before the boom.
And here in piñatas we beat with sticks,
there are sweets that fall when we scream
and grab as many as we can
before they all are gone.

Dasein

Ich bin mit meinem Dasein zufrieden.
--Martin Heidegger

A Bodhisattva melts,
as pitch rolls off his immutable form,
across the pavement,
reminiscent of
black, cracking lava into a placid sea

—A Zen master meditates
in a rock garden for seven
long years. Then
with one awakening,
one fluid arcing of his arm,

the gravel becomes his ocean,
the rocks, the islands,
the rocks now a tiger and her cubs,
all swimming to a dragon.

Then rakes the circle serene again,
returns the world to balance,
drowns
the mother tiger and her cubs,
eats the dragons and the islands,
leaves the world, horrified—

On a busy street beside a blue Austin,
with a gallon of gasoline
an engulfed man resists existence.

Onlookers see the progress into ash
the dark yellows, belching orange,
the bluest flame closest to the skin,
the eyeless, faceless body,
the black bald body.

Passing Showers

He's been working at the stump
all morning.

It's undone slowly, finger by finger,
as a fist pried open, dug out
like an angry tooth.

Slick in her tethers,
his mule leans into the work
as if it were her own.
She won’t prosper
from this field, the crop,
she will not understand
the clodded clumps.

Then he fires the torch,
til the stump smells of cities
and salt.
Sap, loam, lichens sizzle and burst, curse
his name in the language of time.

That furrowed field,
the color of pig iron,
clings to his trousers--
darkens his store bought shirt--
It would drag him down into its belly.

Beyond this, as if a passing ship,
or a rumbling, steaming freight,
the storm breaks.

Drawn Inward

I have asked God,
where lies the perfect circle?
He told me to ask again,
the answers are in the asking.

In minute detail, an artist's hand
draws the other's pencil,
the pine and cone debate sequence,
the hollow bellies of nesting dolls swallow
daughters, mothers, mothers in daughters,
an eye sees two faces envelope
the candlestick—two poised lovers kiss—

the snake swallows its own tail

We will be old again
says the germinating pine cone
we will shade the forest sedge,
buried in the fall of winter,
but roots in earth, child, roots

Ouroboros

I found it in this beginning
in a garden, in a lost corner
under red sumac, sleeping
like piled rope, as if discarded.

There it unraveled its sudden tongue
reaching for the heat of my skin,
stole the strength from my legs.

This killed Cleopatra.
Said don't tread on me.
Take a bite of the fruit.

Sometimes it coils like a wheel
around an axis, licks with its split
tongue the other end, the rattle.

Having two minds in one body,
it is medicine, sheds skin from skin,
empties its parchment loops.
Where does any circle begin?

The Way of the Samurai

1.

a score of stalks
a quiver full
petals bristle like fletchings
verbose and vibrant, volatile
at peace and privilege, cut and dead
in the waterford crystal
on a cherrydark breakfast table

2.

they grow haphazardly in meadows
flourish unkept, barbaric like a city
on fire, azaleas and gerbers, honeysuckle
orchids in gardens, in straight lines,
on tombstones or cultivated to sit still
or salute in passing. Such chaos,
so alive, riotous on a short-lived breeze

3.

copies with no master, the first and ideal flower,
who can claim the first calyx, sepal, stamen or pistil,
who can say I was there to see the inception
to cut the first pedicel or lay the primal bulb open

4.

they grow towards light,
the roots unseen, firm in the earth
with devout tradition,
when it comes that time
valiantly, they throw themselves
against the sharpness of the shears

in that instant, a white shower of flares
falling coronas

fragrant as a battlefield.

Atlas

I have made it my business to take the weight
onto my shoulders, the terra-cotta sphere,
to hold it above the fire, to hold it to the fire.
There are more skeletons on the wind
than dandelion seeds. I have made it my business
to note there are more bullets than bandages,
that families are leafless. I have made it
my business to know baby girls slept
in pig cages, went into the river in pig cages.
Goebbels poisons his darlings before he douses
the light while the Russians, the Russians.
My business is to break my heart to break yours, to ask how
    there is a picture of a child with a bloated belly,
    this picture of a child with a bloated belly.

The Riddle of Shade

Reality demands
that we also mention this:
Life goes on.
--Wislawa Szymborska

Where is the family that lived
in that home, the little legs
pedaling wheels, starched
white aprons on the lawn,
the lit
        candles on the sill?
When did the oven grow cold?

Naked in winter, they clamor
down inside the grotto belly,
breathe in mists that would be steam,
odorless, tasteless mists.

In the silent bowers,
under leafless trees,
in that freshly bare earth,
we could not count
        so many stars.

It is not snow falling in gray December.

Across the vale from Belsen, up
from Hannover, coming down,
it is not stove wood or coal or fuel oil.

Modern Art

I. *The Treachery of Images* Rene Magritte

No, this is not a pipe but a painting
of one never smoked,
never lipped.

A telegram sends some hope:
Want to come home stop
dance the quick-step stop

These are not words but a river.
Wanna see my Model A?
That cat's the bee's knees!

Modern thought before
the guns of August,
the mother of a century
that never had a chance.

II. Leaving for Charleroi: Influences

This is not a pipe
but a tumbling woman
in the Sambre currents.
The slim chambers of her chest
swell with water. She crests, wanes
in the rolling wet hands.

This is not a woman
but a river, gray and limitless.
Her face becomes a green apple,
bobbing
beneath the somber surface.

This is not a river
but rather lurid sorrow,
swollen to the levee with swallowed nerve,
bursting free in winter
as a husband and another woman
kiss through masks,
and the boy hangs
a black ribbon on her portrait,
turns her likeness to face the wall.

III. *Son of Man* by Rene Magritte

A bowler hat, an apple obscures his face,
we could name him anything.
There never was a pipe but a war
for every season. Then the painter
sells this businessman on canvas.

Bellyaching Adam in the garden
with his quince. Reason is a sin,
so says a machine gun
that rat-tat-tats the battles.

The trenches, the scars,
the river bed, the mud:
the hollows held the gas the longest,
some of it still green in the soil,
like the flower that becomes the apple,
like the same Sambre waters
no stranger can cross more than once,
like the false words
in a whisper no longer modern.

Gordian

Heaven cannot brook two suns;
nor the earth two masters.
--attributed to Alexander the Great

I read of you and wonder
did everything come easy?
Was the first man
who took you
on the wet gymnasium floor
after wrestling
rough?
Did he have you
before Hephaestion?

Your father beat you,
but I can understand,
it was an arrow
that took his eye,
what it must have been to see
only half the world when it was
newly foaled. Besides, it's not
a weakling
who washes his spear
in the Indus.

I know they could find you at the head
of every charge,
leading your Companions to victory,
your red hair
under your helmet, the bronze
of your armor
and skirt studs
gleaming
against the dust rising
from the bootheels
of your *Sarissa*.

You wouldn't have it any other way
I know because of the way
you left the Knot in pieces,
how you let your sword
do the work of your mind,
how swift you lived
your life—as if subtle

was only for the bedroom—
not like the way

you entered Babylon
or Bagoas.

And so I ask you
if this is the only way man
may rule men?

It is unfortunately true:
swift action with a sword
makes such short work
of puzzles,
and so it is like you say
All the world is Alexander

because you have rode
the length of it to open
its belly,
and sift through leavings
on the altar, your altar,
for tumors.

Akhmatova's Prayer for Her Son Held in Prison in Leningrad, 1949

If the guard takes your gift,
I know you are breathing.
When you are not breathing,
you must be silent and still
to not disturb the flies.

There are no books in which to write
your tale. You have no face
with which to read it.

After the quiet of red fields,
after the hammer and sickle rust,
will I be able to write
about you, about all this iron?

The story and memory depart
on separate trains.

The first takes the story on pristine wheels,
and does not clatter on the tracks,
does not jar the mind. It will not return.

Memory travels on the other, the more
worn-down engine, the imperfect machine
held together on bare bones.
It makes many trips until its boilers blow.

Beyond the engineer's yard,
where the steel sinews meet the river,
a lumber tug steams its way to sea,
and reminds me when you spent
the summer cutting timber in Komarovo.

It must be the smell of the pine,
and the sound of your divisive axe
falling, or the two halves of kindling
cleft apart in one decisive stroke.

Maybe this is not how it happened,
but it is all I have of you now.

And when that tug escapes the narrows
for the bifurcated ocean currents,
the white hands of the liberators

will usher him down the coast, and over
the imaginary line marking the place

where even the earth bends
and I can no longer watch.

So wrapped in the paper
of this letter is your ploughman's supper.
All I have I pass through the bars
to be carried to you as I carried
you into the world. Let it fill
your belly as you filled mine.

You may not take it with you
when you embark. You board
a train naked tomorrow. To begin
this journey you must end your last,
and I will remain to burn a candle
in the window. One candle for all
words for which I have no words.

Sand

I will show you fear in a handful of dust
TS Eliot

Paint, as you see it,
the blue between the ocean and sky,
each white grain between the sea and beach.

Find words for the copper-hot sand.
Now clap them into irons with your pen.
Chain them in your sentences.

The fishmonger drips red along newspaper
clippings: the round eyes, the priceless scales,
the cartilage lips,
hint at the printed word.

Have you begun to lose your footing
on that beach where no one walks?
Find those words to help me see your sea.

You know the one that built that beach
with grains more numerous than breath,
each one older than circles.

The water of that ocean was a goddess
once, that sun a chariot.
Then was the untouched wild of the mind
before science and language painted the canvas.

Pluck out your thoughts gladly.
They do not belong to you either.

Hurry now with your words,
the encroaching night bends its knee as
the horizon salivates dusk.

Syntagonism

Haj, a nominative in this case,
wrote, 3rd person past tense,
"Carlos, which has 6 letters,
lives upstairs," a verb phrase.

Extraordinary, an interjection
of an adjective, I thought, 1st
person past tense, I understand
what he means by this, a pronoun.

For example, converse with your dog.
Sit. Go. Fetch, all of these
are imperative moods
of the English language.

Fear, is an abstract noun. Jesus Christ
is a concrete noun. Which is real
is only which is realized. Noun,
a person place thing idea.
Candidly, all are open to interpretation.

Thus I might never get a blind man
to believe the color green,
but I can make him realize green
is an adjective with five letters.

And when he says, what's this all matter,
an interrogative sentence, I counter
        what's it all matter?,
a rhetorical interrogative,
which in reality is declarative.

Man, I say, "what's it all matter"
is the crux of all languages
just like green is the crux
of all colors. This is indicative.

He says, you're speaking Greek,
an idiom,
        exasperated, I respond
what do you know, you're blind.

Chrysalis

When I am not awake I am driving west
by moonlight,
through places where the night chrysalis
opens, unfurling its membranous wings,
those glowing mad eyes.

We drive through desert until dawn,
the point in time when I decide
I have had enough of greatness,
and turn away from all this luster.

It is true that I never loved
until I pressed
my atoms past your atoms
in the realms inside our palms.

In the desert that surrounds us,
at the mountains' cornice,
light runs like water into pools.

Ahead of us, the blindness stares
into the sun, and like a rage of bees,
an uncast exhalation
fills the world between us.

In the Shadow of a Street Lamp

She curls into me, half inside the outdoor shadow,
dark like a river like a portrait by Modigliani
where color shapes sadness, where she bends
unearthly as a crescent on a canvas.

Amadeo refuses to paint
eyes. He asks Picasso how
a man may make love to a cube.
Modigliani dives into drink
because he cannot cut off his hands.

The bottle of wine he raises to his lips is the barrel
of a gun, as if he wants to swallow all the beauty,
to bleed out through his brush. I have never lived
in Paris, but I know this.

Around the blind corner, Amedeo carries
his painting over his head
so that no one tears through and into reality.

Away from all this, here
on my balcony, with her face
halfway in the light,
her open green eyes,

I think of Modigliani and all those he never painted,
of that moonglow alleyway where they finished
what he started, where he realized that beauty
was in the absence between the gas lamps,
where the aroma of jasmine climbs the walls.

The Paradox of the Grain of Millet

“There is no part of the millet that does not make a sound: for there is no reason why any such part should not in any length of time fail to move the air that the whole bushel moves in falling."—Aristotle

We are nothing without something without. Eyes are the reaction to light, and ears the same to sound. We grow skin because of heat, the first time we begin to pull away into ourselves. I have heard it is good to have a mind like a steel trap. I want to cage nothing. I remember when someone says nothing, an avalanche of silence buries us. I am a cavern of noise in that unspoken earth, the solid absence between us. There is nothing to be said that is not somewhere on rock. I have wrought my words to this rock, and they become no longer my words. It is no longer rock when you hear them. When you hear them, you swallow them like stones, like Cronus would his children.

I cannot believe what I see with my eye when I peer at my reflection. The reflection appears like a kaleidoscope. I am in the glass of the mirror, the glass of my eye. I am half the magic trick. I am partly wrong in this whole thing. Correct me, completely. I have played my hand.

Mirror your hand to mine, mirror finger to finger, my epidermis to your skin. Mirror me in the glass goblet, the one that shattered, the many. Mirror me in sex, in the abstinence of union, in half the distance. Mirror me in the difference between reality and the real world. Mirror me in articulated language, in hand gestures, in screams. Mirror me in music, the whole note, in the half notes, in rhythm, in syncopation. Mirror the decision to remain on your bed of reeds as the cataract sweeps you down the Nile. Mirror me in the Dead Sea, at the end of all things, and a world will pass between us, lush, with serpents and clay people. Again.

Resonance

Mother, I have a gun. I cannot blink you free, a dust mote
in the pit of my eye, an upturned lash,
I will not flush you clean with tears.
You are in the navel I will not unravel,
the brand on my body of that dark room where I will not go
except to say there were other men in your life.

Mother, when you cast me from your womb
I landed in the Garden of Eden.
Mother, the apple is the symbol for the lips,
the passage I climbed through.
That was my great feat, but I am yours,
and this knowledge kills me.

Mother, your hands are parchment. What is it like
to watch them wither? Mother, I weighed
nine pounds; the milk
has gone sour with mud.
Mother, I drank from you and now I eat meat.
I was a one cell, I had gills, and now I visit the moon.

Mother, the wolves tear the fleece on my flanks.
Once there was a man you loved to give a son,
for that I am penitent.
Once the sun revolved around the earth,
and men died pointing out the stars. Mother,

Copernicus was right.
Mother, I can blow my brains
out with the Bomb. I will
if it comes to that. You have my eyes,
or I have yours, or both at once. Mother,
I am going blind.

Life swallows us by the legs,
and you pray to go under first.
My heart, yours, is breaking;
I am up to my neck.

Waning Gibbous

We bury you in that hospital,
but you are still alive. We gather

over you while you sleep
away your last weeks.

You drink Orpheus through the steel
in your arm. Nothing is dream as this.

The world moves
around the hands of the clock.

We run down the street
for food while you doze.

You do not eat with us. You do not eat.
With life still in us, we cannot sit close.

Distance has grown as we have aged,
and now it has settled at comfortable intervals.

You discover in between dreams
that this as the time and this

as the place. Your journey comes
as natural as breathing; Forgive us—

If we could only find our way

to let you go. With grief, we bury you
because grief is for the living. It is the soil

tossed on the coffin of the love we lose.
We tamp down the sod over the hole we fill,

something missing, six feet below us,
settles in the firmament of the sheets

soaked in the sweat of your sickness.
In the gibbous of your life, we move on.

First Christmas After

My father burns the leaves in heaps
that resemble toads.
He is under the tree that opens like a hand
someone boiled for its bones and left
the clawlike digits splayed apart. The sky
is the grey sea without the salt.

When my mother feeds us jellied jalapeños
on crackers, with gingerbread and wine,
the spicy-sweetness brings the chill indoors.
To think it is the time of year again
for woolen coats, the time the living dress
in blacks and browns, with passing leaves
the only color.

Of all the seasons, autumn lives with loss.

Inside, my mother douses brandy on
pecans. They wheeze in sudden yellow gusts
of heat and crack in two. In brilliant flares,
the unaccustomed pitch, not gentle, not
at all the way that ice submits to water.

The Mooring of the *Barker May*

Into port she hurtles on the starboard tack. Every line a mare's tail,
with rent
tatters through her mainsheet, she bounds through autumn
breakers the color of bone, the wind that hauls foam
off the swells and heaves mist like ghosts from the currents.

And longshoremen sixteen hundred yards in, on the wharves
swamped with watchers, all solid tars before the mast, soundless
white faces that see no one at her helm, no hands aloft,
and snapped runners waving like Medusa's own snakes.

To hear her beams yawn, grinding tooth against tooth,
to hear in every kneeling wave the exaltation of the drowned.

As the harbormaster's claxon sounds, she makes way
against the wind, home to moor after seven years lost at sea,
with her keen wail lingering like barnacles, with her carrion crabs,
the rolling soulless sockets of her eyes as she bites home.

I Build My House on Stone

The earth cools as we sleep.

I can find nothing
of myself
in the tombs
of ancient rivers
that once carried lovers
on beds of reeds.

For you last night
I caught the Dog Star
in the south.

How is it we have a name
for all that
nothing?
As if
we could even hold it
in our minds
the way I crush you
until I am empty,
without a thought
of tomorrow
that someone will have
to wake early
to turn the shades
against the sun and
while they're up,
feed the cats.
In our bodies
there is strength to go on,
and when he
is old enough to open
his own eyes,
I will have this sky
to show him
all these places
his father never went.

Once Upon A Time

In line at the payroll office, Charles Bronson
waits to collect his silver.
He just shot the black hat off some
tinhorn's head, and Henry Fonda lies
dying as his patchwork teeth jaw open.

And I remember holding a catfish
in 1982, prying the hook
out of silver dapple skin.
The toothy mouth around my thumb
first open, then closed.

Even at the age of seven,
I recognize the throes
as I live and breathe,
and blackberry-like entrails
spill from the gills to stain
my grip.

Time,
the galloping of it,
the absent breaths
of a catfish out of water,
the black reels spooling up
on silver platters, the truculent lights
killing the darkness in auditoriums,
where the only ways out
are red with Exit.

It's a revenge picture with Jason Robards
stretched over a saddle of a sorrel mare.
And the volume rises at his words,
hollow as a pinebox.

Somewhere in these Sixties dreams,
a bombshell with golden red ringlets
carries through the dust
pitchers of water by their handles,
and the echoes of six shooters
are just now rounding the corner.

Wake

One.

Eventually it will happen to you. Someone dies,
you find yourself staring at the mallards on the wall.
In the recesses of the house someone keens,
like a victim pinned under the wheels of a car.
Downstairs, casseroles taste like leaves, the coffee
burns on the burner, and people snake in the door.

Two.

Awnings on a sidewalk in Rheims are important
to no one. A womb in Jakarta, as you take this breath,
an egg gestates. Somewhere in America, a man with three
names digs a shallow hole. A girl takes her first step
on a verdant lawn. While you exhale, a thug in Haiti
slides a machete through the shoulder of a mother.

Three.

At times these lives are unaccustomed to the soft wind.
These hands are rubbed raw over a burning barrel.
To some the winter snow is a brilliant blessing,
to others it is the lowing of the cow whose calf
has not turned. What does the wind hold in store
as it finds the holes in the eaves, and bites
fiercest when embers are buried in ash?

Four.

The face of a clock hides the gears, tells us how to begin
and end and bide our time. It taunts, hassles us,
gives us ulcers—black and mottled—chases our children
into adulthood, intones the moment the roast is done.
In the parlor of that mallard paper house,
as relatives and paper plates clutter the living room,
the clock hands refuse to budge, and in your coffin
you take no notice.